

Chapter 16

The Chestnut-Stuffed Turkey

Michel Audiard — *Monsieur Gangster* — Blunders are like taxes: sooner or later, you always pay up.

There's Christmas in fairy tales, New Year's Day well lubricated... and the chestnut turkey, well and truly stuffed!

After a week of conflict, the Viking waves the white flag. Truce... He hasn't grumbled for fifteen minutes. A record!

Him — It's New Year's Day! Let's bury the hatchet, I'm taking you out to dinner!

Me — No thanks, I'm sleepy and I haven't been paid yet.

Him — Don't worry, it's on me, so we can unwind a bit.

Me — No, I'm shattered. All I dream of is my bed.

Him — Come on! A change of scene and a party will do us good!

A quarter of an hour later... out of arguments

Me — You think? Maybe you're right... what about the village?

Him — No, I don't like driving home late on black ice.

Me — Why not a restaurant in the resort?

Him — Not that either, I've got a better idea! What about the one right next door? That way we can drink and walk home.

Me — Oh no, that's where I work, that won't relax me one bit! My boss is under pressure. He's throwing a dinner for the whole resort. It's THE night of the season!

Him — Yes! It's the best option! There, I've booked, now come here! *kiss kiss*

The Viking invites himself along, with his one-metre Big Dog. Me, awkward smile, on high alert. Behind the charm, he's been wound up tight as a violin string for a week. I'm

braced for the worst, he's looking for an excuse... Bingo! Our table (or rather his ego) has been plonked in the middle of the aisle.

Him — That's it, I've had enough!

Me — Please don't make a scene. We're here, we're staying.

The Viking gets up noisily, staggers heavily and bellows for all he's worth:

Him — We're leaving! It's me or your boss! You come with me, or it's over!

Lovely atmosphere! There, he's got what he wanted, he's led me right up the garden path! Naturally, he picked New Year's Day. The real one, the only one, the painful one. Everyone's embarrassed, except him, fuming... and secretly gloating! I follow him out, to head off a scene. I plan to come straight back, pay for both our meals and apologise. Except outside, it gets worse...

The betrayed emperor squawks like a turkey. The sound's too loud, so I mute it. I just keep the pictures and swap the soundtrack for *Jingle Bells*, hard-rock version. The Nordic werewolf howls outside in the snow for the whole meal. His back against his *drak-car*, a beer in the hand he points at the restaurant in the distance, he drinks, he swears (so my boss can hear, I imagine). Luckily, we can't hear him! The music drowns him out. I do hope it's the same inside the restaurant.

Bum-numbingly awful, in the poo up to my neck! I have to wait for his broken record to calm down from going round and round... After two hours, I go back to see my boss, tail between my legs, not confident, *not-at-all-at-all!*

Me — I'm sorry, sorry, sorry about his behaviour. Truly, for you as much as for me! I'll pay for us both.

The boss — No. However... you can pack your bags. And he fires me.

Except that, at the time, it didn't go like that, *not-at-all-at-all!* The boss is a pro, he stays perfectly courteous.

The boss — No, that's fine. You didn't eat anything.

Me — Yes, really, I insist.

The boss — It's on me, my treat.

I accept, unconvinced, *not-at-all-at-all!* I don't like owing him a favour... seeing as he still hasn't paid me, frankly, it suits me. Revenge is a dish best served frozen. I'm forced to wait for my pay: he drags it out until the very last customer. It's a fight between two fighting cocks with oversized egos, and I'm the prize: the Christmas turkey! Stuffed with chestnuts! Lovely New Year's present: a year of hell!

The Viking throws me out of his *drak-car* three times, in the middle of the night, in the snow, minus 6 degrees outside. Seen from here, it's slapstick. Seen from inside, it's Greek tragedy. Failure to assist a person in danger. Luckily, my body has reserves, and my car is safer: I play the radio in my head: "*Roxanne, you don't have to put on the car light!*" I'm his precarious tenant of love, his part-time luxury rough sleeper.

The next day, in the middle of a massage, all of a sudden, a chill runs down my spine. A flash of clarity. The boss has no customers left and wants to fire me. The Viking wants to leave and get me fired so I'll follow him to his kingdom. I feel the vice tightening. Tipped off by my cosmic antenna, it's confirmed when I get home from work. The Viking speeds up my execution.

The Viking — I can't stand waiting for him to pay you any longer, I'm leaving. Let him find a solution.

The boss — I haven't got a solution! Bye! And he fires me!

Worse, I find out later he made out I'd resigned! The rat!

I hate the mountains! I'll say it again, and I'll sign it.

They both won. Each of them got what he wanted.

And me? I'm stuffed... on ice!

Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — So, you want to rescue the damsel in distress and get even with the big bad wolf of a boss?

The Viking — Naturally, I'm "her" Robin Hood, her knight in shining armour, her saviour!

The author — My saviour? You throw me out at minus 6 °C! Bold, as humanitarian concepts go! More like a panicking teenager with an imaginary sword!

The Viking — She gets on my nerves! She talks nonsense, she never understood me! When the police knock at the door, it's *Ragnarök*. The runes are bad. My territory is violated. I set sail.

The journalist — How do you keep your head above water?

The author — At the time? I have lots of sleepless nights, when sleeping is my passion.

The Viking — Instead of getting out of the game as fast as possible! What's wrong with you?

The author (*to the journalist*)

— And afterwards, I try to solve these absurd situations, with humour. That's exactly why I'm writing this book.

The Viking — You're putting me to sleep, you're a walking sleeping pill! Are you ill? You're usually funnier!

The journalist — Can you tell us more about him?

The author — Brilliant, charming, popular... a real lucky bag! In his *drak-car*, I soon notice his odd reactions: intrusive, bossy, extreme... ly fond of a can. The hero drags his baggage behind him and plays the drama queen. Naturally, the people close to him drift away... In the end, it makes him deeply sad to find himself all alone, despite all his charm, his good intentions and his manly strength. At the time, I only saw his manoeuvre. It took me a book — and a jazz club — to find out why.

The journalist — You ask yourself a lot of questions!

The author — Loads! First I let the emotion out, then my truffle-hunting nose... (*miming a truffle hound*) I sniff, I sniff for the fear hidden underneath. When I find a key, I've cracked it. Well, that's just my opinion... not the absolute truth. It's like mushrooms: find one, and there are others! That's why I invite the reader to invent a scene that explains what drives him to manipulate me. Just for a laugh at our expense!

The journalist — In a game of truth, what do you think of each other?

The Viking — Oh, she's a wonderful woman! Who suffers from a very nasty addiction: compassion. To avoid conflict, she can't say no. And she idealises the romantic side of her life. Rather charming, actually, but a pity, especially for her, as she doesn't really realise what she needs.

The author — And you think you know what I need? That's precisely why you put my survival at risk! But my name isn't Roxanne. Spending nights outside isn't my thing.

The Viking — So why were you such a doormat? Why didn't you react?

The author — Setting my limits takes time. So I managed to ban you from quick fixes.

The Viking — You had nothing left, you should have come home with me to *Lower Valhalla*. It was logical! But you didn't love me!

The author — No job and no Troll-speak: too risky! I needed work. I did everything to find some. I loved you!

The Viking — See, you admit it! I knew it! You're hopeless at negotiating! I'd never have admitted it in your shoes!

The author — No, you'd have said "*I love you so much*", just to hear me answer "*I love you too*"!

The Viking — That's below the belt, you ungrateful woman! I did everything for you!

The author — Everything! Above all, convincing yourself! ... but it's just your ego rocking you to sleep.

The journalist — And what could she have done about her boss, in your view?

The Viking — A good knee between the legs now and then, it does you good!

The author — I should have thought of that! You as a punchbag!

The Viking — Good idea! I bet you'd have written a bestseller and we'd have stood a better chance of making our romance work!

The author — Yes! Like Elizabeth and Darcy, Harry and Sally, Scarlett and Rhett!

The Viking — Nothing more recent? Then again, you're not wrong... Even if I find it hard to admit, I think I like it when you shut me up. It's exciting, naughty Fräulein!

The author — You say that afterwards, but at the time, you never let go! It's like us in real life: people find us well matched and very funny together. And yet, in the novel, it's the opposite. There's no chemistry between us.

The Viking — See, that's exactly the kind of thing you don't say in an interview.

The author — Right, don't tell the truth without your approval.

The Viking — Not if you want people to read your book. Just say: *"we're funny from start to finish."* You really can't sell yourself, stupid French woman!

The journalist — Let's talk about your rows, it's funnier!

The Viking — We met late in life, we have middle-aged rows.

The author — Yeah. Like two pacifists trying to have a fight.

The Viking — Oh yes, with a feather... under the feet! I have great fun winding her up.

The author — Like when you used to bang your muscly finger on the table...

The Viking — You wanted to do the same, and your finger snapped clean.

The author — I had to wear a splint and you were laughing your head off!

The Viking — You're so clumsy, stupid French woman! Without your work tool, we could finally leave. It was hilarious!

The journalist — And you, are you never ill?

The Viking — I wait until I'm at death's door to see a doctor. It's cultural... My antibodies resist everything. I'm an old weed seed, indestructible. Unlike you French, who pop pills like sweets all day long, just because they're on prescription. And then you're surprised you get diabetes!

The journalist — And these days, do the mountains tempt you?

The author — How can I put it... some have tried. They had problems...



The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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